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AUTHOR Theobald, Paul; Nachtigal, Paul
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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, rural schools have been tightly linked to their communities, and the process of schooling has reflected local values, mores, and ways of life. However, during the early 1900s, the beginning of the Progressive era, allegiance to local ways received heavy criticism. An inherent assumption, that bigger is better, was promoted as the way schools should be. Today, this assumption continues to influence the "one best system" for educating children. The study of history and philosophy reveals that industrial tenets affecting education such as specialization, standardization, centralization, technological efficiency, reliance on experts, and the reduction of the production process to its lowest skill elements were not the product of natural evolution, but merely decisions made by people with power and an agenda for its use. Eroding quality of life in both rural and urban settings, as well as mean-spirited ideological battles over school reform, signify a rapidly deteriorating sense of community. One way to reverse this trend is for society to adopt a new set of cultural assumptions that reinvents political systems, promotes sustainability, and rebuilds both urban and rural communities. Recreating communities requires redesigning education and begins with focusing on the local context of education. Focusing on the community makes learning relevant and therefore more powerful in providing youth with an understanding of who they are and what their place is in the world. For change to happen, rural residents need to recognize how cultural assumptions have disempowered them both politically and economically and to understand that the viability of both rural and urban communities requires cooperation, that this philosophy begins in schools, and that the educational agenda must return to a local focus. Contains 13 notes. (LP)

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Culture, Community,
and the Promise of Rural Education

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by

Paul Theobald
South Dakota State University

Paul Nachtigal
Educational Consultant

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Paul Theobald

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Rural schools have traditionally been tightly linked to their communities. In earlier years, the process of schooling reflected local values, local mores, local ways of being in the world. It was not unusual as late as the 1940s, for example, for small country schools scattered in various locales across the Midwest to add a month of "German school" or "Norwegian school" after the regular school term. In one small North Dakota district, Catholics were dismissed early on Fridays so that the teacher could shift to the Sunday School curriculum.¹ Well into this century, rural places had their own ways.

Perhaps the best documentation of this is Alan Peshkin's insightful study, *Growing Up American*. Chronicling the search for a new superintendent in a small rural community, Peshkin noted that the successful candidate was chosen because, as one school board member indicated, "He's country." In other words, he would fit in. He would provide the kind of educational leadership that was right for the community.²

While pretty much unquestioned during the nineteenth century, this type of allegiance to local ways received heavy criticism during the Progressive era. "Don't underestimate the problem of school reform," wrote Ellwood Cubberly in 1914, "because the rural

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school is today in a state of arrested development, burdened by education traditions, lacking in effective supervision, controlled largely by rural people, who, too often do not realize either their own needs or the possibilities of rural education."³ While he was writing these words, the United States was steadfastly about the business of building big cities to surround big factories. The logic was obvious: schools should be big as well.

Before the close of the Progressive era, consensus was reached concerning the metaphors and mechanisms that would define public schooling in the United States. That is, the "one best system" was identified and promulgated as the way schools should be.⁴ An inherent assumption within the one best system--that bigger is better--proved to be inordinately popular and it continues to serve as conventional wisdom regarding the proper way to formally educate kids.

But we need to be clear about what is driving this particular brand of conventional wisdom. It can best be identified as a "cultural assumption" or an idea that people agree to agree on. Cultures possess many such shared assumptions and the interesting thing about this, for our purposes, is that appearances can solidify cultural assumptions just as easily as an empirical evidential base, if not moreso. For instance, if our cities and factories are growing larger, so must our schools, right? It turns out, of course, that there is simply no evidential base to undergird this view, yet we cling to it as some kind of basic truth.

Perhaps an anecdote will make this point clearer. A front-page story in a large midwestern newspaper told of a little town with a

little school where folks were joining together to help keep each entity alive. Not far from this community a few teachers in a much larger district, after reading the article, expressed their belief that all such small schools should be closed. The irony in this anecdote is that these teachers were at that very time working on ways to create teams of teachers and students, or to create "schools within their school," in an attempt to make themselves small. While they recognized the trend toward making small, friendly, inviting places out of schools, these teachers were nevertheless unable to use this as intellectual leverage over the shallow assumption that being big means being good. Because such cultural taken-for-granted are rarely ever analyzed, these teachers were not able to see the contradiction.

What this anecdote demonstrates is that it is important to push the analysis of rural circumstances beyond what one sees on the surface. It is not enough to look around and say there aren't enough jobs here, so let's try to get some. Or, on the school side, it is not enough to say we have too few students, so let's consolidate or let's buy some distance learning technology. The analysis needs to start with why there are too few jobs and too few students. There is then greater potential for creating a renewal agenda that will address root causes rather than symptoms.

Industrialization: The Name of the Old Game

Though educational history is often maligned as an unimportant component of teacher preparation, no force shapes the day to day professional lives of teachers with any greater magnitude.

Indeed our propensity to eschew both the study of philosophy and history as potential contributions to teacher education constitutes another rarely analyzed cultural assumption, one that severely handicaps the odds for successful educational renewal.

The study of history and philosophy helps us to see that converting industrial tenets--such as specialization, standardization, centralization, technological efficiency, reliance on experts, and the reduction of the production process to its lowest skill elements--into analogous schooling practices was not some kind of natural evolution, though its strongest proponents liked to believe this. It was merely a decision made by people with power and an agenda for its use.

The rationale behind this decision was found in a philosophy which held that the greatest level of public good was created by an "invisible hand" when individuals pursued their own self-interest. This was obviously convenient for eager industrialists interested in individual acquisition. Buying into this philosophy as a nation (along with many others) meant that schooling was slowly converted into an institution dedicated to mobilizing individual prowess to be used in the race for self-interest. There would be little wrong with schooling for this purpose if the philosophy were true. But the amount of evidence which challenges this philosophical position is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. As sociologist Herman Daly contends, it appears that rather than an invisible hand building the common good, what has emerged is an invisible foot that is slowly kicking the common good to pieces.⁵

Daily headlines remind us of the eroding quality of life in both rural and urban settings. Domestic violence, drug abuse, youth gangs

in schools, the growing demand for more and more prisons, and, closer to home for most of us, the mean-spirited ideological battles that are becoming ever more frequent around school reform; all are symptoms of the deterioration of any sense of community. What is the role of education in our society? How should our children be educated? Arriving at some kind of community consensus regarding these questions is increasingly difficult, for society has lost its center. There is no common project, common good, or "common-unity" of the sort that once promoted a sense of mutual obligation, social responsibility, and belonging.

So how are we to proceed? Will the industrial pattern continue? Will rural places continue to be exploited in the name of efficiency? Will, as Alan DeYoung and Craig Howley have suggested, "schools that would sooner use blackboards than computers, teachers who would concern themselves with ideas more than employment, and parents who prefer the happiness of their children over a good return upon 'human capital' investments" continue to be seen as "willful primitives" in this global society?⁶ Perhaps, but these things are not inevitable, they are not part of some natural evolution. Society is what it is and our cultural assumptions are what they are because of a long and complex history of public and private choices, both of which can (some would say must) be changed to enhance the odds for producing sustainable, vibrant communities well into the future.

Ecology: The Name of the New Game

David Orr, in his provocative book, *Ecological Literacy*, suggests a number of ways that society must change along with a new set of

cultural assumptions that must be established. Our industrial, extractive society, according to Orr, should be replaced by one that hinges on ecological health. To move in this direction will mean reexamining and changing the way we live our lives, how we educate our children, how we do politics, and how we go about collective problem solving. The place to begin these tasks is within the context of the immediate locale. Orr, Wes Jackson, Daniel Kemmis, and many others are pushing our culture toward a new worldview, one that rejects the ever escalating global competition connected to our excessively individualized orientation to life. The place to begin, they tell us, is in one's place. They propose a "bioregional" philosophy to guide the creation of ecosystem-level societies. Some of the defining features of bioregionalism include:

- 1) Reinventing political systems that are in harmony with the ecosystem, e.g. areas defined by mountain ranges, watersheds, or other natural phenomena. Organizing around natural features provides fundamental reasons for finding common ground around such issues as air quality, water usage, land development, and so on. This may require more creative thinking about maximizing democracy at the local level. Benjamin Barber believes that such changes as filling local offices through the use of a lottery would be an excellent start. Banning quick media sound-byte political advertisements represents another plausible strategy.⁷
- 2) Reinhabiting our places in ways that are sustainable, or, in Gary Snyder's words, "living as though [our] grandchildren

would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we're doing right now, with deepening delight."⁸

- 3) Perhaps most important, bioregionalism demands rebuilding the local communities, small towns, and urban neighborhoods that have suffered through decades of neglect. Our turn to a "global economy" has been particularly hard on these places for it legitimated the corporate betrayal of communities under the pretext, once again, that some kind of natural process was at work. We were asked to believe that an invisible hand somehow lifts a factory out of a community in the United States and places it in Mexico without anyone bothering to will it to happen. The work of such economists as E. F. Schumacher and Jane Jacobs renders such thinking intellectually vacuous.⁹

Conducting public affairs in bioregions, at the eco-system level, would involve those residing in nonrural areas and those in rural areas acting together to will a common world. Cities, suburbs, and rural areas, recognizing their interdependence, would have the capacity to define working economies. The health and viability of each would depend upon the health and viability of the other.

The Promise of Rural Education

Re-creating communities through the creation of a new set of cultural assumptions grounded in ecologically sustainable practices will require the redesign of schooling. That redesign will begin by refocusing the educational agenda, at least in part, back on the local context, the place where the community is. Today, a large part of the

agenda for education (at least the rhetorical agenda) focuses on meeting the "needs" of the children in our nation's schools. The talk almost always includes intellectual and physical needs, but the net is sometimes cast wide enough to take in such things as emotional and spiritual needs as well. One doesn't need a degree in history to recognize that in the past meeting such "needs" was the function of communities. But according to many observers, the quality of human community in this country has suffered enormous damage and, as a result, we have tried to bureaucratize and institutionalize solutions to our cultural shortcomings.¹⁰ That is, we have tried to create "all-purpose" schools. Middle schools, in particular, are supposed to hone in on a wide range of individual needs. The irony here is that the creation of middle schools sometimes accompanies the closing of small elementary or high schools, schools that previously served as the life-blood of their communities.¹¹ In the interest of making amends in our schools for the diminution of community, we sound the death-knell for yet more communities. This is a little like a travel plan that stipulates one step forward for every two back.

To appreciably attend to the "needs" of students, schools must contribute to the re-creation of communities. Understanding one's place is critical to this re-creation. It ought to be the chief curricular focus in schools for several reasons. First, it promotes the time-tested learning power of combining the intellect with experience. Second, the study of place addresses the shortcomings inherent in our overly specialized discipline-based view of knowledge. Third, it has significance for resocializing people into the art of living well where they are. Finally, knowledge of place--where you are and

where you come from--is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Place holds the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity, something far more substantive than that which is derived from one's ability to accumulate material goods.¹²

Focusing on place, using the community as a curricular lens, not only contributes to re-creating community, but it will also help realize true school renewal by making learning more experiential and therefore more powerful, and also by providing youth with an ability to understand who they are and how they might be in the world. The more students understand their community and its environs--its social structure, its economy, its history, its music, its ecology--the more they become invested in that community. Such investment increases the likelihood that they will find ways to either stay or return to the community. The significance here is not just that one small place is saved, but that the character of our national culture is transformed in the process. Indeed, the promise of rural educational renewal is that it can start us all on the road to a more sustainable future.

The Task Before Rural Educators

Though society's center has been lost, it can yet be found. But the search will be slow and difficult. It begins in conversation and ends in consensus about a common project, a re-inserted center to community life. Along the way comes the painful realization that our unexamined cultural assumptions have played a large role in our declining circumstances. It is only through this uncomfortable process, however, that rural residents can begin to see that they

have become disempowered both politically and economically. Unless this happens, unless those in the countryside begin to make some decisions on their own behalf, the future of rural communities is dim indeed.

At the same time, there is a growing realization in the larger society that all things are connected, that there is no getting "away" to or from anything. No longer can the problem of rural unemployment be solved by encouraging an exodus to the city. And no longer is it possible to escape drugs and crime by moving to the country. Healthy urban communities will exist only if there are healthy rural communities. In turn, healthy rural communities cannot exist without healthy urban centers. The viability of both will require finding common ground which exploits neither and this means moving to a philosophy that stresses cooperation, not competition. The rural school is the proper place for the conversation and consensus-building that yields a cooperative philosophy. For this to happen, however, rural educators have some work to do.

First, though, it should be borne in mind that school redesign focusing on the creation of viable rural communities will be an organic, evolving process. There are no technical solutions which can be plugged in to accomplish the task. The educational agenda which over the years has shifted from a local concern to a state and national one must, in part, return to a local focus. Rather than implementing a set of strategies or standards that have been developed "out there," the curriculum must grow out of real issues important to the students and the people in a particular community.

Involving students in activities that connect with their own experience, that require the use of skills from various disciplines, that are carried out in cooperation with others, and that result in a useful product are the most powerful kinds of learning experiences.

Second, school redesign focusing on the creation of viable rural communities will require a different set of expectations around an expanded mission for the school as well as a different set of expectations concerning how the process of schooling takes place. Education is not just about improving standardized test scores or being first in the world in math and science. It is also about learning to live well in a community. This means explaining to an unaccustomed public that the community and its environs can serve as a laboratory for learning and that students will be out in the community during school time.

Third, creating viable rural communities is more than job creation since living well in the community is more than an economic endeavor. It also entails appreciating--as well as creating--the history, art, literature, and music of the region. As rural schools began to emulate the industrial model of education, local culture lost its currency. History was not history unless it involved famous men in famous places. Literature was not literature unless it was produced by Shakespeare, Shelley, or Keats. Folk music that grew out of the pain and celebration of everyday life was somehow inferior to the symphony. The country has a wonderful example of place-conscious schooling in the Foxfire curricular approach developed in Rabun Gap, Georgia. Among other things, the Foxfire projects demonstrate that focusing on the genius of ordinary places

does not result in a parochial education. Instead, it is a vehicle for learning how to live in a community in the most humane way. If one learns to live well in a local community, the chances of a brighter global future are significantly enhanced.

Finally, providing students with the opportunity to engage in real learning for the purpose of building community does, in fact, represent systemic change, change that goes far beyond national goals or centrally-prescribed curriculum standards. Integrating schooling with the day to day life of the community, providing students with an opportunity to be a part of society now rather than some time in the distant future, and involving students in the struggle to solve complex issues that are important to their community would not only provide more powerful learning, but it would go far toward reducing the growing alienation among youth.

Redesigning education for the purpose of re-creating community, community that is ecologically sustainable, may well be one of the most critical needs of today's society. Generating a new set of cultural assumptions will allow us to live more gently with one another and in greater harmony with the land. But one might legitimately ask the question: Isn't this needed in the cities as well as in rural places? Indeed it is, but here one might best rely on the wisdom of one of America's most insightful writers, Wendell Berry:

My feeling is that if improvement is going to begin anywhere, it will have to begin out in the country and in the country towns. This is not because of any intrinsic virtue that can be ascribed to rural people, but because of their circumstances. Rural people are

living, and have lived for a long time, at the site of the trouble. They see all around them every day, the marks and scars of an exploitive national economy. They have much reason, by now, to know how little real help is to be expected from somewhere else. They still have, moreover, the remnants of local memory and local community. And in rural communities there are still farms and small businesses that can be changed according to the will and desire of individual people.¹³

And that is the hope. Cultures change as individual decisions multiply and cohere. The work of the rural school is no longer to emulate the urban or suburban school, but to attend to its own place.

¹ Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 79.

² Alan Peshkin, *Growing Up American: Schooling and the Survival of Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

³ Ellwood Cubberly, *Rural Life and Education: A Study of the Rural School Problem as a Part of the Rural Life Problem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 105-106.

⁴ David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁵ The reference to the "invisible hand" is from Adam Smith's classic text, *The Wealth of Nations*. The "invisible foot" is from Herman Daly, "Introduction to the Steady-State Economy," in Herman Daly, ed., *Economics, Ecology, Ethics* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1980), 19.

⁶ Alan DeYoung and Craig Howley, "The Political Economy of Rural School Consolidation" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 67 (Summer 1990): 65.

⁷ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 261-275.

⁸ Quoted in Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 80.

⁹ See, for example, E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) and Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992).

¹⁰ The work that establishes this claim is too numerous cite. Special reference should be made, however, to the work of such contemporary scholars as Robert Bellah, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Daniel Kemmis, Michael Sandel, Amitai Etzioni, Peter Berger, Joshua Meyrowitz, Kenneth Jackson, and Michael Walzer. Clearly, this insight was well articulated by earlier scholars such as John Dewey, Reinhold Neibuhr, and Lewis Mumford.

¹¹ Alan J. DeYoung, Craig Howley, and Paul Theobald, "The Cultural Contradictions of Middle Schooling for Rural Community Survival" *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, in press.

¹² We rely heavily here on David Orr's work, especially *Ecological Literacy*, and idem, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 1994)

¹³ Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 168.